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Downtown Buildings that Link Us to Our Past

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It is sickening and it is sad. A building that has withstood the ravages of time throughout its 103 years of life deserves a better fate; yet there it stands, disemboweled and broken by the wrecking ball. The Hoppin Homestead Building on the Westminster Mall will soon be only a memory, and its site will be marked by that ubiquitous asphalt reminder of our automobile addicted age — the parking lot. Is this the cure for old buildings in a downtown that is moving on the road to regeneration?

In many cities of this nation, a building such as this would be looked upon as a community asset, one that needed to be restored and preserved, not as a museum, but as an alive and useful building with a vital link to the past. And it is well to note, as Wolf von Eckhardt of the *Washington Post* reminds us, "that the concept of recycling existing buildings works as well for mediocre 20th-century buildings as for glamorous Victorian mansions or colonial warehouses."

In our capital city, unfortunately, the shortsighted and short term view taken of these buildings by their owners is one of "bottom line" profitability and very little else. The Hoppin Homestead is another of the too many examples to illustrate this carnage of our heritage.

A survey of the Providence downtown done in 1975 came up with a count of 291 buildings set on a compact 350 acres. But we are in danger of losing the rich collection of "inescapable art" found in these structures. Since that last count there has been an inordinately large number of demolitions, and every downtown street today bears witness to this wanton destruction of our connection to the past. Shepard's Tea Room, Mee Hong, Joe's Upstairs and a host of other businesses were once housed in these structures; today, neither they nor the buildings are part of the downtown. The litter-collecting asphalt parking lot, surrounded by bare walls of buildings never designed to be seen from the street, are the legacy of today.

Our compact one-half square mile downtown makes it easy to walk from one end to the other in 15 minutes; much appreciated when one traverses the enormous city blocks of a Washington, D.C., Jacksonville, Florida and a host of other cities not designed for the pedestrian. In this tightly knit area is the multiplicity of buildings that supply the surprises and variety to the pedestrian walking our narrow streets, looking not only at shops but also at the structures in which they are housed. It is this intimacy of narrow streets and numerous, architecturally diverse buildings which gives the downtown a uniqueness among cities, something the architects and planners call "human scale." Yet when old buildings disappear only to be replaced by paving, we will soon find that the unique downtown will increasingly resemble the suburban malls with their emphasis on asphalt rather than structure. The only difference will be ugly, small parking lots interspersed between buildings destroying the interrelationship between structures, as compared to an oasis of cinder blocks surrounded by an asphalt desert.

It is ironic that on the one hand the city is attempting to reduce auto use in the downtown with its soon-to-be-built Auto Restricted Zone for the Kennedy Plaza, and on the other hand allowing building owners to replace our past with dead auto storage spaces. Yet where are the guidelines for downtown development? The location of parking facilities, the design of buildings, the places to be used for open space, the areas to be developed and a whole list of others are questions which the city should be addressing but which it cannot because it still does not have a plan for this most valuable part of the city.

As the Chairman of the Historical Preservation Commission has written, city and state officials tried to save the Hoppin Homestead yet could not because this responsibility for loss of buildings rests with the downtown community. But if we are to rely on the private sector for historic preservation then the lessons of the past illustrate, that, too often, the community at large is the loser. The city must use its powers to prevent the destruction of any old buildings by passing ordinances which require public hearings and city council approval. This may not be the final answer but it will slow this wanton destruction of our legacy.

The Bucklin Building, owned and occupied by the Columbus National Bank, will be destroyed this summer. A new office block to be erected between Industrial and Hospital Trust Banks will destroy five old buildings rather than incorporate them into a lower building, as was suggested by a distinguished group of design experts brought to the city by the Providence Citizens' Lobby. And on and on it goes, the cutting off of our ties with the familiar, with the past.

The owner of an historic building is nothing but its caretaker, charged with a responsibility to ensure that it can be passed on to our children. Does he have a right to destroy a building that essentially belongs to all of us and to which he has made no contribution?

Since the National Register of Historic Properties was created in 1966, it has designated about 15,000 landmarks, and 3,000 of these have subsequently been destroyed. This national tragedy must be stopped, and it can be stopped by making use of strong local measures. This is what the city of Providence has yet to do — devise means to prevent the temporary caretakers of our architectural heritage from destroying for reasons of profit that which has been entrusted to their stewardship.

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Chester E. Smolski is Director of Urban Studies, Rhode Island College.